Foreword

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Art Bulletin of Nationalmuseum Stockholm
Volume 28:1
barely two years after Nationalmuseum’s reopening, Sweden and the world were hit by the Covid pandemic. This continued to affect our activities in 2021, with the museum being closed until the spring, when limited opening hours were introduced for the Zorn – A Swedish Superstar exhibition. This was a great success, but was ringfenced by strict access restrictions, which also applied to the rest of the museum. For this reason, ticket bookings and slot times were used to better control visitor flows and to guarantee entry to the exhibition. Another consequence of the pandemic was that there were no programme activities in 2021, as limitations applied to the number of people who could participate in seated events. For exhibitions, the situation remained the same during the autumn, when the next exhibition, Scandinavian Design & USA – People, Encounters and Ideas, 1890–1980, opened and remained on display until 7 January 2022. After this, all restrictions were lifted.

For the Nationalmuseum, as for other cultural institutions, the pandemic presented a huge challenge. At the same time, work continued on making experiences for visitors to the collections as rich as possible. This entails a responsibility for showing the elements that make the Museum unique, those that are known and those that are unknown. Another focus is the areas of the collections that need further strengthening, so we have actively worked on acquisitions over the past ten years. Due to the absence of state funding for acquisitions, this is only possible thanks to generous donors and returns from the Museum’s investment funds.

The Nationalmuseum has one of the world’s finest collections of 18th-century French art, although this emphasises the Rococo Period due to Count Carl Gustaf Tessin’s many purchases in Paris in the early 1740s and, for the same reason, there has long been a lack of important works from after the middle of the century. One example is Noël Hallé’s The Schoolmaster, 1751 (NM 7591), which was a public favourite at that year’s Salon. Teaching as an artistic subject of moral import had long been a popular motif and gained new relevance in the Enlightenment, see article on p. 13.

The collection of Swedish 18th-century art was expanded over the year through the purchase of Louis Masreliez’ Allegory of War (NM 7613) from Christie’s in New York. The painting was intended to be one of two overdoors in Gustav III’s bedchamber at the Royal Palace. It is an important piece, not least because it is an excellent representation of the turning point in the artist’s career, from magnificent history paintings to more decorative work, see article on p. 23.

A not insignificant component of these acquisitions is characterised by art from the first half of the 19th century, with important pieces from France, Germany and Denmark. Many artists from these European nations gathered in Italy, especially in Rome; Roman streets and their characters became a popular genre. Old Italian Woman with Distaff (NM 7603) by Jean-Victor Schnetz is an unusual and exciting example. The elderly woman who modelled for this was also engaged by his artist colleagues such as Léon Cogniet, François-Joseph Navez and Léopold Robert, see article on p. 31.

Another popular subject with the international artists in Rome was landscapes. The encounter with the intensive light and the monumental views spellbound them all. One excellent example of the highest quality is Denmark’s Anders Christian Lunde’s Ponte Clementino and Monte Soratte, Civita Castellana (NM 7610). The artist was one of several generations who were fascinated by the landscapes in this area north of Rome. Lunde has superbly captured how the sunlight filters down through the ravine. This acquisition was made possible thanks to a large donation from Lars Vogel in the autumn of 2021, primarily intended for 19th-century landscape painting.

Landscapes otherwise comprise a category that is well represented among the year’s acquisitions, not least of several important views, with a particular emphasis on the artists who worked in Fontainebleau and the surrounding areas. The leading name among the Barbizon painters is Théodore Rousseau. He previously had little representation in the museum, but the purchase of his A Pond in the Forest. La Mare aux Evées (NM 7609), from the 1840s, has added an excellent example of his very personal style of painting. It was characterised by dramatic light contrasts, clean lines and bitumen colouring, which gave his atmospheric images a dark, dim atmosphere. Rousseau regarded the wetlands that he depicted...
here as pristine nature, and hurried to document them before the area was affected by ditching in the mid-1840s. Lars Vogel’s donation has also enabled several purchases of Nordic landscapes, including examples from Finland by Magnus von Wright and Emma Gyldén, which combine an objective perspective with romantic and atmospheric painting. For some undecipherable reason, landscapes, like other art from our eastern neighbour, have been underrepresented in the Nationalmuseum’s collections, see article on p. 41.

During the year, the Nationalmuseum was also able to acquire a key work by Julia Beck, her painting Autumn Day from 1883, which is both a landscape and portrait (NM 7614). The woman in the painting is her artist friend, Gerda Rydberg Tirén, and the location is a cabbage garden in Grèz-sur-Loing. Julia Beck was almost forgotten for a long time, but has recently made a comeback and is now one of the late-19th-century’s most popular artists. The painting, a gift from the Friends of the Nationalmuseum, shows the breadth and the depth of Julia Beck’s artistry, see article on p. 53.

Julia Beck’s painting is one example of the special effort the Museum has invested over the past decade in acquiring works by female artists. The most spectacular case is the acquisition of the American-French artist Mary Cassatt. Along with Berthe Morisot and Eva Gonzalès, she was one of the three significant female Impressionists, les trois grandes dames, in the otherwise male-dominated group. It is a portrait of the artist’s sister, Lydia, a freestanding study for The Cup of Tea, now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York (NM 7618). This is the first direct purchase of an Impressionist painting that the Museum has made in a century, see article on p. 47.

During the preparations for the “What joy to be a sculptor!” exhibition, shown in the spring of 2022, some important acquisitions were made due to this significant collection of Swedish female sculptors from the late 19th century and early 20th century. One example is Ida Matton’s Supplice de Loke (NMSk 2409) from 1897, which was a gift from the artist’s descendants, see article on p. 59.

The Nationalmuseum has important collections of older applied arts and occasionally objects that had been lacking turn up. In terms of silver, we have been delighted to receive gifts of older Swedish silver over several consecutive years. Märtta Christina and Magnus Vahlquist, who have long been passionate about art and the applied arts, not least silver, have shown great generosity to the Museum a number of times as regards older Swedish silver, see article on p. 9.

One particularly prioritised area of applied arts and design is 1920s Sweden, often called Swedish Grace. One key work comprises the pewter furnishings – a table and tall folding screen – drawn by architect Uno Åhrén in 1928. These custom-made, exclusive pieces simultaneously represent both tradition and the future. They are the biggest and most spectacular items to have been produced by Svenskt Tenn. They were all made on a mahogany frame, clad in matt pewter with patterned inlays in shiny brass. They were commissioned by Isabelle Mann Clow from Lake Forest, outside Chicago, Illinois. This acquisition was possible thanks to a significant grant from the Friends of the Nationalmuseum and the Axel Hirsch Fund, see article on p. 65.

The Nationalmuseum has a defined mission to represent and develop knowledge of the arts, preferably in association with the collections being kept and displayed. Research activities play an important and integrated role in the collections’ presentation, and one element of this is exchanges with foreign researchers. In this issue, we are able to publish the recent Tessin Lecture, held by Professor Penny Sparke, Kingston University, London. She talked about the shifting significance of plants in interior design, from the Victorian Era to Modernism and subsequently.

This issue of Art Bulletin of Nationalmuseum Stockholm will only be published as a digital edition. The consistent increases in the number of downloads demonstrate how this opens up for greater and simpler dissemination of knowledge about the museum, even internationally. The Nationalmuseum also aims to reinforce its digital publication of collections and research results.

During the final stages of publication, we were reached by the sad news of the passing of Barbro Norbelie (1942–2023). Norbelie was a specialist in the work and life of the sculptor Ida Matton and contributed an essay on the artist to the Nationalmuseum publication Nordic Women Sculptors at the Turn of the 20th Century (2022). She had the opportunity to oversee the typesetting and proof-read the article about Matton’s sculpture Supplice de Loke published in this issue of Art Bulletin of Nationalmuseum Stockholm.